

## *1968: The My Lai Massacre*

Forty years ago, in one of the lowest points of the Vietnam War, U.S. troops killed hundreds of unarmed civilians and the Army tried to cover it up

By Craig R. Whitney – New York Times Upfront, February 25, 2008

It happened at the height of the Vietnam War came to symbolize all that went wrong for America in that conflict. On March 16, 1968, in a village known as My Lai, American soldiers killed more than 400 unarmed Vietnamese civilians, among them children the elderly, many of whom were rounded up, pushed into ditches or herded together, and shot.

The officer in charge later claimed that the villagers were enemy Communist guerrillas, but other witnesses painted a much more troubling picture, and what became known as the My Lai (MEE-LIE) massacre sparked widespread outrage when it was exposed more than a year later--mainly due to of an American soldier not involved in the operation. It only added fuel to the tire of a growing antiwar movement at home.

The United States had been involved in Vietnam for more than a decade, starting with its support for France as it fought a Communist-led rebellion in its century-old colony.

The French were defeated in 1954 and Vietnam was partitioned into Communist North Vietnam, which received heavy backing from China and the Soviet Union, and pro-Western South Vietnam. It was the height of the Cold War and Dwight D. Eisenhower, trying to keep Communism at bay, sent hundreds of military advisers to train the South's army.

As fighting intensified in the South, John E. Kennedy's administration increased the number of advisers to 17,000 by 1963, but it was his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, who sent the first U.S. troops into combat. Many of them were draftees.

### GUERRILLAS & CIVILIANS

American forces--more than 543,000 at their peak in 1969 fought against both Communist guerrillas, known as the Viet Cong, and North Vietnamese Army troops. The Viet Cong often wore the same black pajamas as the South's peasants and rice farmers, making it hard and dangerous--for American G.I.'s to figure out who was a guerrilla and who was a civilian.

The first months of 1968 were a turning point in the war. In January, the Communists launched the Tet Offensive, a series of attacks across the South timed to Tet, the lunar New Year. Militarily, the attacks were a terrible defeat for the Communists, but grisly TV images of the fierce fighting shook America's confidence in what was becoming an increasingly unpopular war.

Shortly after the Tet offensive, on March 16, the men of Charlie Company, part of the Army's Americal Division, helicoptered into My Lai, in an area known to G.I.'s as "Pinkville" because of its rice farmers' Communist. Many were still angry over the death days earlier of a respected sergeant who was killed nearby in a booby-trap explosion.

Charlie Company's Commander, Capt. Ernest Medina, had told his men that they would find a dangerous guerrilla unit in the village, and that any civilians probably would have gone to the fields by the time the troops landed; the soldiers were to kill the guerrillas and destroy the village for sheltering them. Small-arms fire from assault helicopters would rake the area first.

Led by a 24-year-old lieutenant from Florida named William Calley, the first platoon of Charlie Company's 100 men were the first to jump in. As they began sweeping through the thatch-covered huts and low brick buildings, they were met not by enemy fire but by more than 500 civilians--old men, mothers and grandmothers, and children.

Fired up by his commander's warnings that only Communist guerrillas or sympathizers would be in the village by the time they landed, Lieutenant Calley told one of his soldiers, "You know what I want you to do them. I want them dead. Waste them."

The soldiers were confused, frightened, and badly led; and not all of those under Calley's command followed his orders, but enough did. The killing went on for four hours. In one incident, some 75 Vietnamese were rounded up, taken to a large ditch, and shot. Other men, women, and children were blown up in their homes or in bomb shelters. Soldiers set houses a fire, killed livestock, and raped women. Army investigators later estimated that more than 400 villagers died.

#### FIRST REPORTS

But some of the Americans in My Lai that day were horrified by what they saw. One of the assault helicopter pilots, Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson of Georgia, saw the killings and landed several times to try to stop them; later that day, he told his superiors that what he had seen was deliberate murder.

Captain Medina characterized the incident much differently to his superiors: 20 to 28 civilians had been killed inadvertently at My Lai, he said. The Army did not seriously investigate Warrant Officer Thompson's report and in fact, tried to keep the events at My Lai secret.

The truth did come out, after Ronald L. Ridenhour, an Army helicopter gunner not involved in the operation but based nearby, heard about what happened at My Lai from other soldiers. Haunted by their stories, he spent months of his own time collecting accounts from G.I.'s troubled by what they had done or witnessed that day.

A year after the massacre, on March 29, 1969, he sent 30 copies of a report to government officials in Washington, demanding that they investigate events in My Lai. "Exactly what did, in fact, occur in the village of 'Pinkville' in March 1968 I do not know for certain," he wrote, "but I am convinced that it was something very black indeed."

In November 1969, a freelance journalist who got word of the report, Seymour Hersh (later a New York Times reporter), wrote an account of the My Lai killings, which became front-page news around the world.

#### HOME-FRONT REACTION

In the U.S., antiwar activists asked how President Nixon--who had won the presidency in 1968--could justify a conflict in which some American soldiers could rape, pillage, and kill the very people they were supposed to be protecting from the Communists. Defenders of the war dismissed the reports of atrocity as enemy propaganda amplified by a gullible American media.

But the atrocity was real, and now the Pentagon had to undertake a real investigation. A panel led by a three-star general interviewed 398 witnesses and recommended action against dozens of men for the crimes and their attempt to cover them up. Captains, colonels, and generals were charged with cover-ups of mass killings, with lying about them, and with dereliction of duty.

But in the end, charges against the higher-ups were dismissed or the trials ended in acquittals, and they were allowed to resign. Only Lieutenant Calley was convicted, on March 29, 1971, of premeditated murder of "at least 22" of the hundreds who had been killed. "They were all enemies," he told the court-martial. "They were all to be destroyed." Calley was sentenced to life at hard labor, but President Nixon ordered him freed from the stockade at Fort Benning, Georgia, after three days. The White House said Nixon made the decision himself, though a spokesman noted the White House had received thousands of telegrams in support of Calley. A Gallup poll published a week after the court-martial found 79 percent of American disapproved of the verdict, most because they thought others shared blame for what had happened.

Calley spent three years under house arrest at Fort Benning, in an apartment on the base where he watched TV and took courses in cooking and accounting, before a Federal judge freed him on appeal on \$1,000 bond. Later he worked in his father-in-law's jewelry store in Columbus, Georgia, and while his conviction was upheld by the courts, he never went back into confinement.

By 1973, after negotiating a cease-fire--and after the deaths of 58,000 American soldiers the United States had withdrawn all its combat forces. Two years later, with Gerald Ford in the White House, the Communists overran South Vietnam and took control of the entire country, with years of harsh Communist rule to follow. They made My Lai a

memorial to American brutality, in part to obscure the memory of Communist war crimes like the execution of about 3,000 civilians in Hue during the Tet offensive.

#### VIETNAM TODAY

In time, the enmity between the U.S. and Vietnam faded. The Communist Party still rules but has undertaken extensive free-market reforms, and today the U.S. and Vietnam have diplomatic relations and trade extensively.

For many Americans, My Lai became a symbol of a war they had opposed, but also an admonition to observe the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Agreed to by the U.S. and other countries in reaction to Germany's atrocities in World War II, the Conventions barred mistreatment of civilians or torture of captured enemy soldiers.

My Lai may have been an aberration, as many believed. But with the U.S. at war in Afghanistan and Iraq following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, American troops are once again finding themselves in treacherous combat situations like those in Vietnam fighting enemies who look and dress like--and take cover among--local civilians, some with fatal confusion.

After a Marine died in a roadside explosion near Haditha, Iraq, on Nov. 19, 2005, his comrades tried to retaliate, and 11 women and children were killed. The Marines did not conduct a serious investigation until Time magazine wrote about what had happened, in 2006. Four Marines were initially accused of hunting down and murdering civilians in the neighborhood, shooting the victims and throwing grenades into their homes, and four more were charged with dereliction of duty. Describing the pre-court-martial proceedings last October, The New York Times that a Marine investigator said the killings "should be viewed in the context of combat against an enemy that ruthlessly employs civilians as cover." Earlier this year, the go-ahead was given for a Marine sergeant and a lance corporal to be tried on charges of wrongful killing, and two officers face courts-martial on other charges related to the incident.

"To go back into another war where you don't see the enemy, in a culture you don't understand, inevitably, when you're taking casualties, you sometimes take it out on the people," says Seymour Hersh, who is now a writer for The New Yorker.

But in this kind of conflict, that can turn into the most damaging sort of failure.